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Emotion-focused coping, social support and active coping among university students: Gender differences

Abstract

The present study investigated the strategies used by Greek students to cope with stress-inducing situations. The Greek adaptation of Echelle Toulousaine de Coping (ETC) was employed to assess coping strategies as well as various aspects of coping, including action, information-seeking and seeking support from family and friends. Results showed that female students tended to report significantly higher levels of coping than male students, both positive and negative. Although students did not significantly differ in terms of particular coping styles, significant gender differences were found for individual aspects of coping. Interestingly, women showed preference to emotion-focused strategies, such as seeking social support or engaging in activities to distract themselves from stressors. It was concluded that providing students with effective ways of managing stress is important for targeting counselling interventions.

Keywords: coping strategies, university students, Echelle Toulousaine De Coping, emotion-focused coping, social support, active coping

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Introduction

Stressors related to university life as well as developmental pressures may challenge students' efforts to cope. Various strategies are usually employed to overcome situations experienced as stressful or overwhelming, such as problem-solving, positive thinking, and expressing emotions. Other common approaches include reframing, planning and self-distraction, seeking help from friends and significant others, participating in activities outside class, as well as religiousness and humour.[1] Problem-solving strategies may also be used to identify and address the source of stress, as well as to develop an action plan to handle the problem.[2] These techniques can help students better adapt to challenging conditions, reduce their stress, and improve their overall well-being.[3]

Coping strategies have been broadly categorized as problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is an active approach that involves taking steps to directly address the source of distress. Examples of problem-focused coping include problem-solving, seeking social support, and seeking professional help.[4,5] Problem-focused coping involves figuring out ways to alleviate stress, setting clear objectives, and taking action to resolve issues. Researchers have a positive stand on this coping strategy, as it has been shown to reduce long-term strain levels.[6] Further categorizations have also been proposed to deepen and clarify the concept of various coping styles.* Active coping has been introduced to describe one's use of own mental and physical resources to address a challenging situation.[7] These efforts are meant to either alter the stressful event in order to make it less difficult, or to alter one's stand and reactions to it. Relevant examples include problem solving, decision making, and goal setting.[8]

Active coping strategies (also known as approach coping) involve cognitive and behavioural mechanisms that are intended to make a direct response to the stressor, either by changing the issue (primary control) or the negative emotions related to it (secondary control)[10] by Freire. This may include approaches such as planning, acting, looking for help (instrumental and emotional), seeing the positive side of the situation, or accepting it.[11]

Action strategies involve taking action to address the problem or situation causing stress.[12] They often require individuals to be actively engaged in fulfilling their own goals. Active coping encourages problem-solving and can also provide a sense of accomplishment, as individuals can see the progress they have made in their own skills and abilities. Successively, cognitive flexibility is enhanced, improving quality of life.[13] Individuals may develop resilience through the development and improvisation of their skills and abilities.[7] Additionally, active coping is generally associated with intrinsic motivation, as it requires individuals to be actively involved in their own objectives. Engaging in proactive problem-solving can also bring about a feeling of accomplishment, as people observe the progress they have made in their own talents and capacities. Furthermore, individuals may develop a mindset based on the certainty that one's talents and abilities can be strengthened.

Emotion-focused coping encompasses a range of thoughts and actions taken during a stressful situation to reduce the physical and psychological reactions to stress, without in fact solving the underlying issue.[4] While this kind of emotional control may be helpful in some cases and for a short period of time, it is usually not beneficial in the long run.

Emotion approach coping (EAC) is a type of adaptive emotion-focused coping strategy, in which individuals deal with their feelings.[14] EAC is the act of trying to lessen the negative emotions associated with a situation or event. It involves emotional processing, that is the recognition, comprehension, and acceptance of one's emotions, as well as emotional expression, that is the verbal or nonverbal externalization of one's emotions.[15]

Endler and Parker[16] proposed that emotion-focused coping may involve emotional expression or emotion-oriented, and disengagement or avoidance-oriented. This distinction was supported

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*In this paper, we select the terms from the international literature that are included in the categorization of Echelle Toulousaine de Coping (Esparbes, Tap & Sordes,1994), which is the scale we used for our research.

by both theoretical and empirical evidence. Emotion-oriented coping strategies, like venting, involve engaging with the stressor, while avoidance-oriented coping strategies, like denial, involve distancing from the stressor. Therefore, according to Carver et al.,[17] certain emotion-based tactics are considered effective, such as positive reframing and growth, or acceptance, as they may help individuals to adjust to the situation, and sometimes to also move towards problem-focused coping. These include cognitive restructuring, that is challenging and replacing negative thought patterns into positive ones, as well as mindfulness, which involves focusing on the present moment and accepting thoughts and feelings without judgment. Other strategies include creative resources, such as art, music, and writing, as well as physical activities, which help to reduce the physical symptoms of stress, including headaches, muscle tension, and insomnia.[2] Physical exercise in particular may contribute to stress alleviation by releasing endorphins that act as natural painkillers and improve mood.[18]

Previous research addressed gender differences in coping strategies. It has been suggested that women tend to employ emotion-focused and avoidance coping more frequently, whereas men typically use problem-focused coping.[2,15,19] According to Matud,[20] the magnitude of gender differences is moderate to small, yet still significant.

Methods

A total of 294 Greek students enrolled in Departments of Speech Language Therapy, Social Sciences, Nursing, and Computer Science participated in the study. The sample consisted of 141 female and 53 male students (Figure 1) with a mean age of 19.8. No consideration was given to students' origin, family composition, or socio-economic status.

The Greek version of Echelle Toulousaine de Coping (E.T.C.) was administered.[9,21] E.T.C. has been translated and validated in Italian, Spanish and portugeuse.[22–25] It was chosen due to its psychodynamic orientation and its multidimensional approach.[26,27] Moreover, it has been effectively tested on many research groups in the Greek population, and its reliability has been established through assessing its internal consistency.[28–33]

Toulouse's Scale for Coping consists of 54 items investigating coping strategies. It subdivides strategies into six coping styles, that is Focus, Social Support, Withdrawal, Change of Attitude, Control and Denial. It further assesses each style according to three aspects: Action, Information and Emotion (Table 1). Coping styles are categorized as Positive and Negative, while a total score of coping is also obtained. According to Esparbès, Tap and Sordes[9] the aforementioned strategies have been conceptualized as follows:

Table 1 Aspects and Dimensions of Coping Strategies in the Toulouse's Scale of Coping

Aspects / Strategies	Action	Information	Emotion
Focus	A. Active focus	G. Cognitive focus	M. Emotional focus
Social support	B. Social support	H. Informational Social support	N. Emotional Social support
Withdrawal	C. Social and behavioral Withdrawal	I. Mental Withdrawal	O. Addiction
Change	D. Attitude change	J. Acceptance	P. Values change
Control	E. Activities' regulation	K. Cognitive control and planning	Q. Emotional control
Denial	F. Entertainment	L. Denial	R. Alexithymia

Action strategies include taking action to reduce stress, such as involving in physical activity and taking part in activities, problem solving or seeking help from others. Information strategies include gathering information to better understand the stressful situation, such as talking to others or exploring the issue.

Emotional strategies include expressing and managing one's feelings, such as talking to a friend about the problem or writing about it. Positive strategies include reframing the situation in a more positive light, such as focusing on the positive aspects of the situation or finding humor in it. Negative strategies include avoiding stress, such as procrastination or ignoring the problem. Overall strategies include engaging in activities that make one feel better, such as listening to music or going for a walk. Focus strategies include focusing on the task at hand, such as analyzing breaking the task into smaller, more manageable parts. Social support strategies include seeking support from others, such as talking to a friend or joining a support group. Withdrawal strategies include avoiding the situation, such as stopping or withdrawing from the situation. Attitude change strategies include changing the person's attitude toward the situation, such as looking at the situation from a different perspective or focusing on personal development. Control strategies involve taking control of the

situation, such as developing an action plan or setting goals. Finally, denial strategies include the refusal of anxiety's existence, such as pretending that the problem does not exist.

Results

Results showed no major distinction between men and women in terms of Focus, Control and Denial coping strategies. More specifically, the findings revealed a small difference in the Focus strategy ($t= -0.92$, NS), a slightly larger difference in the Control strategy ($t=0.11$, NS) and a larger difference in the Denial strategy ($t= -1.40$, NS). However, none of these differences were statistically significant, suggesting that there was no major disparity between male and female students.

However, results pointed out significant gender differences for individual aspects of coping. Female students reported significantly higher levels on Action ($t=-2.56$, $p<.01$), Information ($t=-2.39$, $p<.05$), and Emotion ($t=-3.00$, $p<.01$) than male students. They also reported significantly greater overall coping ($t=-1.90$, $p<.01$), as well as positive ($t=-2.15$, $p<.05$) and Negative ($t= -2.46$, $p<.05$) coping compared to male students (Figures 1–3).
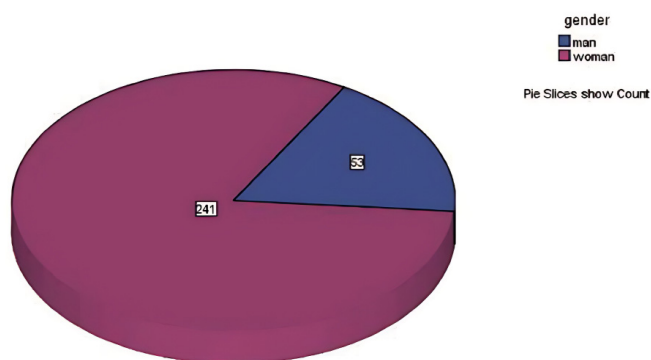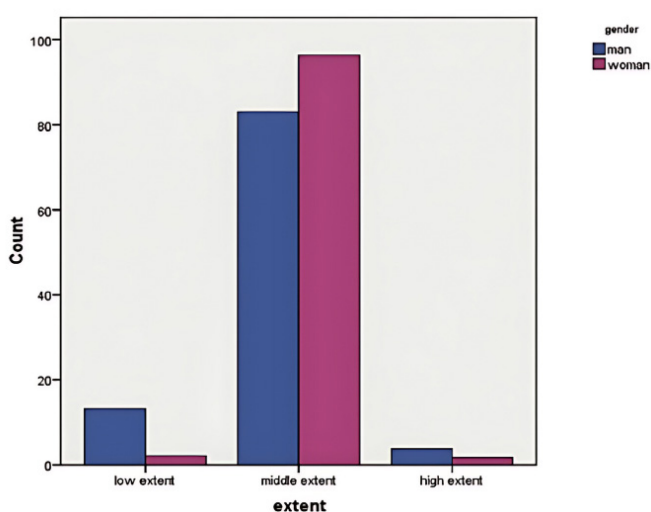
Figure 1 Students' Gender.

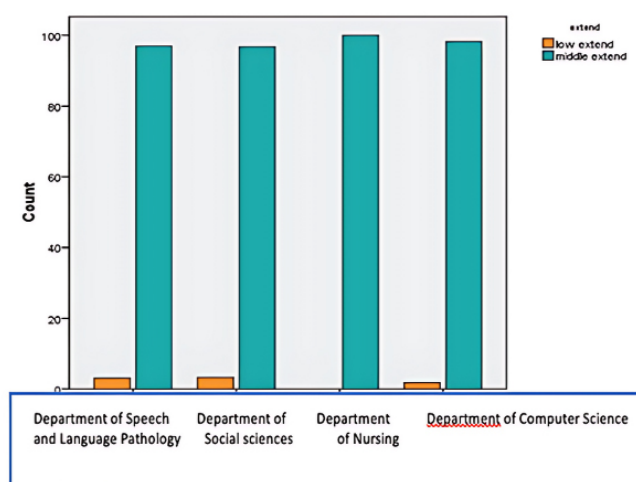**Figure 2** Aspect of Coping "Emotion" and Gender.

Figure 3 Overall Coping and School of Study.

Results showed some minor differences among schools of study for coping styles and overall coping, but they were not large enough to be considered statistically significant.

Discussion

Data analysis revealed some gender differences in overall coping to manage stress and overcome demanding situations. The latter suggests that either women may have a greater awareness of the need to cope, or that they might be somewhat predisposed to activate a greater range of coping strategies than men. The present study also found that male students seemed to employ a more direct and proactive approach in dealing with stress, while female students tended to use more passive coping strategies, such as relying on social support or trying to distract themselves This contrast is in line with socialization theory, which states that men and women address stressors in accordance with their distinct social roles.[34]

Our finding that women show preference to emotion-focused strategies is compatible with previous findings, suggesting that women perceive emotional information-seeking as more effective than men do.[35] It has been argued that university female students are more likely to use social support as a coping strategy than males.[36] Social support may come in many forms, such as talking to friends, family, or a therapist. This type of coping can provide emotional relief, as well as help to identify potential solutions to the problem. Besides, social support has been utilized in greater extent, because women may feel more comfortable talking to others about their problems. Additionally, social support can provide a sense of connection and belonging, which can be especially helpful during times of stress.[37] Indeed, the present study found that female students prefer seeking help from friends and family in order to cope with stressful situations, whereas men were more likely to try to cope on their own. It has been suggested that female college students tend to rely more on social support than male students, perhaps because they consider this as a necessity.[38,39] It also seems that females may be more inclined to utilize a variety of techniques to manage stress, while males may be more likely to depend on fewer methods of coping.

Several researchers have found that gender plays an important role in determining how individuals cope with stress.[18,39,36,40–44] Previous studies have shown that women are more likely to use emotion-focused coping strategies, such as seeking social support or expressing their emotions, while men are more likely to use problem-focused strategies, such as problem-solving or actively trying to change the stressful situation. Additionally, research has indicated that women are more likely to use avoidance strategies, such as denying the problem or avoiding the situation, while men are more likely to use active strategies, such as seeking help or engaging in physical activity. These findings suggest that gender is an important factor when it comes to developing effective coping strategies for stress.

Nevertheless, confounding factors may have affected our findings and should be considered. For example, there is some evidence that socioeconomic status may play an important role in coping but was not examined in the present study. It has been argued that both avoidant coping and problem-solving strategies were found to relate with one's socioeconomic standing, although in different ways for males and females.[45] Overall, "coping is a complex process."[46]

Implications

The present study may contribute to university students' counseling by providing some insight into how they cope with the challenges they face. It may also offer some guidance on how to best utilize coping strategies in terms of their various aspects, with regard to gender as well as certain types of stressors. By providing counselors with this information, they can better equip young students with the skills they may need to manage stress and challenging life events. Interventions targeting on stress management may also increase students' awareness and enhance effective coping.[47,48] Interdisciplinary training programs should be designed to provide students with a comprehensive

understanding of the topic.[49] Additionally, innovative programs should provide students with opportunities to apply their knowledge into real-world contexts and ameliorate the quality of their life.[50,51] Adopting a holistic approach to training may facilitate students' awareness to address the challenges in this area and make a positive impact on the world by adopting more functional ways of coping with stressful events.[51-53] The present findings added to the body of knowledge on stress management by also presenting some limited evidence for coping with stress in a particular cultural context. As a result, they could be used to inform culturally sensitive interventions and perhaps public health policies with regard to enhancing access to culturally appropriate coping resources.

Limitations of the study

There are several important limitations of the present findings. First, we used convenience sampling and examined a relatively small sample from only a single university. Thus, the sample was not representative of students' population in Greece, and this has undoubtedly limited the generalizability of our findings. Moreover, the present study relied on self-reported data concerning a specific set of coping strategies, which may not reflect the full range of strategies used by individuals. In addition, the study did not control for other factors that might be of importance, such as mental health.

The results of this study could be further strengthened by expanding the sample size, as well as increasing the diversity of the participants. For example, including participants from different age groups as well as different academic and socioeconomic backgrounds may provide a better understanding of gender differences in coping with stress. Additionally, it would be useful to include participants from different cultural backgrounds, in order to understand how different cultures may have influenced the way individuals cope with stress as well as to examine the effectiveness of certain coping strategies in different cultural contexts. By expanding the scope of this study, it would be possible to gain a greater insight into how different individuals cope with stress, and how this can be used to reduce adverse effects.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of interest

None.

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